

Finding and Engaging Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth with Resources

Claudine O'Leary

rethink
resources

The logo for Rethink Resources features the word "rethink" in a bold, dark red font above the word "resources" in a bold, dark blue font. The letter "o" in "resources" is replaced by a circular icon containing a white arrow that curves clockwise, symbolizing a cycle or a process of rethinking.

Goal

- How to have conversations with youth about their experiences and resources available without forcing or mandating them

About me

- Technical assistance, training, capacity building
 - Benedict Center – Sisters Project
 - Milwaukee Academy
 - La Causa
 - Lad Lake
 - Proactive Outreach for the Health of Sexually Exploited Youth (POHSEY)
 - Sojourner Family Peace Center
 - Youth Living Out Loud Mentor Project
 - More on occasional basis

About me (youth version)

- Represent! A youth leadership group for teens with life experience in the sex trade
- Real Talk and sharing real life skills and knowledge (DT)
- Real Talk on the Outs
- Real Talk about Youth and the Sex Trade (10 sessions)
- Advocacy to explore your rights and options
- Opportunities to express your ideas and be heard

Some of my experience

- Started with Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt (WHISPER) in Minneapolis (early 90's)
- Started the Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) in Chicago for teens and young women in the sex trade and street economies (98-06)
- Focused on harm reduction outreach, leadership development, popular education workshops, social justice activism with youth impacted by the sex trade and street economies

Definitions

- Youth = youth of all gender expressions
- Youth or Teens = 17 and under for this presentation
- Sex trade = sex or being sexual for money, gifts, drugs or survival needs; sometimes you or someone else gets to keep all or some of the money/resources

Grown people terms

- Commercial sexual exploitation
- Sex trafficking
- Human trafficking

Adultism

- Defined as the "behaviors and attitudes based on the assumptions that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without agreement"

Youth Build 2011

Terms youth might use

- Hustling
- Trapping
- Bust some moves
- Do what I've got to do to survive

Working theories

- Love for harm reduction
- Community building – circle process
- Liberation focused – anti-oppression, system change
- Nothing about us, without us
- Popular education – youth co-developed groups and curricula

Different words=different results

- Life experience in the sex trade vs. sex trafficking
- Awkwardness of unusual terms
 - “they think I’m trafficking”
- Power of naming a perpetrator and power of youth defining their own experiences
- Name experiences instead of labeling someone

Youth voice

But they don't self-identify...

- As what?
- Why is it important for them to identify as what you want?
- Identity formation is complicated already
- Maybe they are telling you in their own way.
 - She did me wrong
 - He's not loyal

Where to find youth

- Schools
- Community Centers
- Out of home care and shelters
- Families
- Existing youth groups
- Social media
- Through friends
- Faith communities
- Social service programs
- Systems like juvenile justice, child welfare

Youth risk factors for commercial sexual exploitation

Static – can't change

- Past sexual abuse
- Loss of a parent from abandonment, death or incarceration
- Cognitive disabilities
- Growing up in poverty

Dynamic - changeable

- Low school attendance
- Experiencing bullying
- Low supervision
- Negative peer group
- No safe place to live
- Lack of one stable connection to a trustworthy person

LGBTQ

Lesbian

Gay

Bisexual

Transgender

Queer

Questioning

Same sex attraction



Teen males

- Homeless, runaway, forced out
- Targeted by older people
- Recruited by friends
- Porn, stripping, cam shows
- Controlled by someone older sometimes
- Sold by parents, guardians and other family
- Exploited with girlfriends

- What makes it hard for adults to talk with youth about the sex trade?

Negative repercussions youth often experience from telling someone

- Judgments, assumptions, never let you live it down
- Lose friends
- Family will be angry or disappointed
- Lose level or privileges
- More restrictive settings
- Visits from police
- Some youth workers will say you brought it on yourself, you're dirty and promiscuous, you'll never change
- So many people will find out and talk about you
- People are "concerned" about you; describing services in a way that says the youth needs to be fixed

As a result...

- Adults reward dishonesty and silence by making it too difficult for youth to tell us with all the negative consequences
- Adults are great at putting the fault of few disclosures on youth (they must be brainwashed, they must not be ready to change, they must not understand the danger)

- Commercial sexual exploitation is not “youth behavior” but the (criminal) actions of adults towards youth

A welcoming environment where youth want to tell us

- Extra support
- More access to good places to live
- Extra clothes and shopping
- Caring people surround you with support
- Extra outings
- Lots of love from people you care about
- Someone to listen to you without judgment
- More options than seemed possible

Focus areas youth request

- Legal rights
- Health needs – including but not limited to sexual health
- Relationships
- Practical needs
- Jobs
- Small school options, credit recovery, GED, Job Corps
- Alternative healing options
 - Outside of therapy in a little room
 - Meditation, Aromatherapy, Herbs, Acupressure

Besides violence – experiences teens have that make them want to leave the sex trade

- Boredom
- Betrayal
- Irritation
- Fights with other youth
- Fed up with fake people, no loyalty
- Repetitiveness
- A real alternative opens up

- Why do youth who've been commercially sexually exploited **hate** mandated reporting?

- “Nothing happens”
- “It’s too many people talking about me”
- “What’s the point?”
- “Why worry about it now; they didn’t before”
- “I’m not ready to talk about it”

Possible solutions

- Some of us aren't mandated reporters; we can build relationships first
- Explore all options concurrently
- Stick with the youth; it's not about passing the child off but walking with them through the process

What if youth “don’t want help?”

- Maybe they don’t want the help you’re offering
- Ambivalence is a part of change
- Maybe they want help but don’t want to give up the sense of freedom, access to cash, usual coping skills like smoking weed or even just cigarettes
- Start the connection, don’t force it
- Explore what they’ve already tried and their frustrations



**options,
not judgments!**

represent!



**Every other
Wednesday from
5:30-7pm**

Wed. November 19
Wed. December 3
Wed. December 17



**a leadership
group for teens
who've
experienced
the sex trade**



**Free snacks,
positive resources
and earn your
way to cash gift
cards!**

**including stripping,
sexual videos/pics,
and sexual exchanges
for money, gifts,
drugs or survival
needs.**

**We meet at a
NEW confidential
place in the city
- ask for location
when you call**



**Express yourself,
help others, share
what you know and
learn even more!**

**No pressure
No judgments**



**For details and
more info, call
Claudine O'Leary
414.212.5121**



**rethink
resources**

Youth love:

- Talking with someone that has been vouched for (youth sometimes know each other)
- Someone who accepts them, as they are, right now
- Advocacy with systems; someone who is on their side and makes things happen
 - Changed lawyers
 - Made case workers respond
 - Showed up to court

Youth want:

- More “people who’ve been there” involved

Sharing personal experiences

- Complicated for youth care workers
- Boundaries
- What's the therapeutic benefit? When does it become about you?
- Sharing portions is different than spilling out the whole story
- Sharing your story repeatedly can be challenging
- Some sharing gives youth hope and a path forward

Youth want:

- For their actions and expressions to be welcomed with openness, respect and love

Be familiar with
youth culture

Whose tattoo is this?



Ideas from youth

- Incentives
- Make it fun!
- Youth leadership with adult support
- Make it easy to participate through transportation help, childcare, time of the group
- Make programs small so youth don't get lost



Welcoming space

- Rethink Resources
- www.rethinkresources.net
- Claudine O'Leary
- 414-212-5121